

Persians bearing gifts 08-01-2023

Last Friday was the feast of Epiphany. Epiphany is the day we remember the visitation of the Three Wise Men. Why do we set aside a day in the Church's year to think about the Wise Men? After all they were a kind of flash in the pan. They came and they went, leaving behind some gifts and, let's face it, a trail of destruction. The slaughter of the Innocents and the flight into Egypt. It sounds like an event better forgotten rather than celebrated. And, of course, the event was a boon to Christmas Card designers who play dress-ups with the wise men and conveniently forget the ghastly events that are said to have followed and the small refugee family. Perhaps Epiphany should be the day we remember refugees!

Epiphany was not always a single-day celebration. Way back, the Church celebrated Epiphany as a season – spreading it over four weeks rather than one. Over time the four feasts were separated and dealt with separately but originally they were “packaged” together. Here they are:

- Nativity
- Baptism
- Wedding at Cana
- Wise men.

Question time about each.

Today we are going to concentrate on The Wise Men

Who were the wise men? Zoroastrians from Persia?

Were they even real, or were they a story — a figment of the imagination constructed to make a point? Does it matter if they were real-or not?

About five years ago I tried to imagine my way into their story - imagining what it might have been like to travel with them:

We see the journey through the eyes of one of their entourage -- a fellow traveller if you like, who penned a few recollections on his return – perhaps a diary entry or a fragment of a memoir.

Walking with the Magi

We heave our weary bones
along the track
as pilgrims do.
Ahead the astrologers consult their charts,
seeking movements
in the starry sky
that might portend
an event of cosmic note
that will answer our deepest questions:

- Is regret the incubator of hope?
- Is sorrow the necessary counterpoint of joy?
- Can I truly be *imago dei*?
- Can I atone for the hurt I've caused?
- Can I forgive too much?

- Can deep silence drown the clamour of my life?
- Can deeds speak louder than words?
- Can Faith's substance resist its empty forms?
- Is holiness contagious?
- Does God speak in riddles?
- Is the future determined?
- Is knowledge a blessing or a curse?
- Can there be death after life?

These scholars and star-readers seek answers,
 (as they have always done)
 in nature's book.
 I wish them luck.
 As for me, I will tag along for the company,
 not looking for signs and portents
 but seeking truth
 in the journey itself.

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I did not know at the time that T. S. Eliot had beaten me to it, and had penned a poem similar in intent,
 but with a skill I could only dream of:

[T. S. Eliot poem?]

Journey of the Magi

“A cold coming we had of it,
 Just the worst time of the year
 For a journey, and such a long journey:
 The ways deep and the weather sharp,
 The very dead of winter.”
 And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
 Lying down in the melting snow.
 There were times we regretted
 The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet.

Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
 And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
 And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
 And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
 A hard time we had of it.
 At the end we preferred to travel all night,
 Sleeping in snatches,
 With the voices singing in our ears, saying
 That this was all folly.
 Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
 Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
 With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
 And three trees on the low sky,

And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

T.S. Eliot
From Collected Poems 1909–1962 (Faber, 1974).

Are such imaginings helpful. Only, perhaps, as a way of putting some flesh and bones to the story - to make it come alive. But no matter how hard we try, the story remains a mystery. Did it happen or did it not. Most of us perform an act that philosophers call "bracketing" – which is to say we suspend both belief and disbelief. We take the story at face value. We attend to the narrative AS IF it happened, and then we mine the story for whatever treasures might be hidden in it.

As if...!

Science and maths tells me
that it's in the nature of the cosmos
that nothing is certain
and that probability rules all.
Nothing is dead-set predictable
and every event sits on a spectrum
between the not-conceivable
and the highly-likely.

So, we step gingerly over and between
eggshell-thick possibilities
and probabilities and likelihoods
and weigh up our chances
of getting where we want to go
without too much damage done.
But things never go to plan,
though plan we must.

We are forced to live **AS IF**...

We must set goals **AS IF** they are attainable.

We must pursue love **AS IF** it will last.

We must laugh **AS IF** life is fun.

We must do good **AS IF** it makes a difference.

We must lead **AS IF** we know where we are going.

We must trust **AS IF** our leaders have some sense.

We must build **AS IF** our monuments will last.

A life lived **AS IF** is not fantasy or illusion;

it's a serious and risk-full business

not to be taken lightly.

And the measure of a life well-lived

is the acceptance of the ups and downs,

and ins and outs and achievements and failures.

To live **AS IF** is to be human

and to walk in faith and hope.

Karel Reus, October 2018

We might think of this as a proceeding in faith. In our daily lives we do it a lot. In fact our lives are lived by countless acts of faith. If we do not think the world, and the people in it are trustworthy to a great extent we would go mad. We proceed AS IF the world, and the people around us, are trustworthy. In other words we live on the basis of countless working hypotheses that we can live AS IF trust (or faith if you like) is justifiable. It is as if we live in a series of stories in which we believe we know the outcomes. So, it does not really matter that the story of the Wise Men actually happened or not. In our mind's eye it happened. Certainly, the truth needs to be "unpacked" or "decoded" or, to use another metaphor, dug out or unearthed and each of us may find something a bit different.

We can share these "finds" Look, we say. See what I have found? We put these finds together and pass them on. They form a tradition – not unchanging but feeling AS IF they have a degree of permanence. The stories anchor our faith and anchor us in that faith.

So, let's unpack this story. We will bracket our credulity. We will put to one side the question of whether the story is "factual". No stories are "factual". All stories are versions. Each "version" paints a picture. Each story delivers truth - if we dare find it.

- Gold — Royalty
- Frankincense -- Priesthood
- Myrrh — Embalming.

Who knows if the wise men really did carry those gifts. Long Before the Prophet Isaiah spoke of Gold and Frankincense:

all those from Sheba shall come.

*They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

Matthew added the Myrrh. He wanted to make a point about the totality of Jesus' ministry. King! Priest!
The dying suffering God!

Returning to T. S. Eliot:

*...were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.*

Make of it what we will. The wise men may, or may not have been present in the stable that day. But in our lives, at this time of year, certainly, they are present – bearing witness to an event of cosmic significance. We will go on AS IF.

May it be so.